

KANSAS HISTORY

A Journal
of the
Central Plains

Volume 15, Number 3
Autumn 1992





Soldiers' Recreation Center, Junction City, ca. 1942.

The prevailing attitude of white society in the 1940s dictated a separation of the races which made segregation the norm throughout America on the eve of the Second World War. Nevertheless, when the United States joined the battle against fascism, the African American community supported the war effort; the "Negroes Of Kansas" were, according to the Topeka Daily Capital, a "Big Part of [the] War Program," contributing mightily to state and local civilian defense efforts and to the armed forces.

As troops began to congregate at the various military facilities within the state in 1941 and 1942, Kansans, white and black alike, made plans for their entertainment. The first black servicemen's club (pictured above) was opened at Junction City, near Fort Riley, in late summer 1941. Thousands of young men and their female civilian companions frequented this "splendid idly-equipped recreation" center where they enjoyed snacks, music, dancing, ping-pong, reading materials, and many other services.

Manhattan, Topeka, and Wichita were among the other Kansas communities to establish similar centers under the sponsorship of the Work Projects Administration (WPA) and the United Service

Organizations (USO). These cities took considerable pride in the services they were able to render the nation's "fighting men." Community leaders sought to make the separate "colored" centers equal in the opportunities they provided for relaxation and recreation.

No matter how sincere their motives or efforts, something was "inherently unequal" about this racially motivated practice. Increasingly, African Americans questioned the viability of a society that maintained a separation among its races; how could such a nation "fight Nazism," they asked. "America," argued the editor of Kansas City's Plaindealer, would "have to become stronger in its national defense and its practice of democracy" if it was to confront successfully the current world crisis. "We hope that when the smoke is over and the guns cease to roar and the hostile nations lay down their bombs that Democracy will rise above the storm and be allowed by the people of America to become a reality regardless of race, color or creed."

Our photo essay "Kansas At War" continues in this issue with "At Ease" which takes a closer look at the activities within the USO and WPA recreation centers.

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Cover: A young, midwestern family struggles against poverty during the Great Depression. Poor relief in southwestern Kansas from 1930-1933 is the subject of this issue's "Hard Times—Hungry Years." Back cover: World War II poster promoting the USO. "At Ease," part 3 of "Kansas At War," focuses on USO and WPA centers which served U.S. military men and women.

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Kansas History (USPS 290 620) is published quarterly by the Kansas State Historical Society, Inc., 120 West Tenth Street, Topeka, Kansas 66612-1291. Second-class postage paid at Topeka, Kansas. Postmaster: Send address changes to *Kansas History*, 120 West Tenth Street, Topeka, Kansas 66612-1291.

Printed by Mennonite Press, Inc., Newton, Kansas.

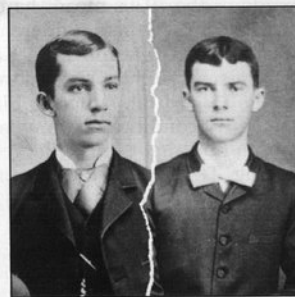
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